PHONOLOGY OF KALA LAGAW YA IN SAIBAI DIALECT

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0. INTRODUCTION

The Kala Lagaw or Western Torres Strait language is the indigenous language of many of the islands in the Torres Strait. It is described by Voegelin and Voegelin (1977:279) as belonging to the Pama Maric Subgroup of the Pama Nyungan Language Family of Australia. There have been four major dialect groupings within the language. The present work uses data given by Saibai Island residents. They represent the dialect group of the most northerly part of the language area popularly called 'Top Western' - Saibai, Dauan and Boigu Islands. These islands have a combined population of over 500. Of about equal population is the Central Western Dialect group spoken on islands to the central west of the Strait - Mabuiag (Jervis), Badu (Mulgrave), and the St. Paul's settlement on Moa (Banks Island). The Kubin settlement on Moa is said to reflect heavily the Southern Dialect group formerly spoken on Muralag (Prince of Wales) and Moa. This dialect group is now otherwise extinct. In the islands so far mentioned, Kala Lagaw Ya (hereafter abbreviated to KLY) is the main means of communication, except for St. Paul's settlement where a creole or variant of English is widely used. Other groups of speakers of these dialects totalling well over a thousand are found at Thursday Island, at Bamaga on the tip of Cape York, and in northern centres along the Queensland coast. Some of the older indigenous residents of the central islands of the Strait speak a fourth dialect of KLY but Islanders tell me that the great majority of young people speak a creole or non-standard English, often mixed with KLY.

KLY is referred to as the Mabuiagic group by Oates (1975:327-35). Sidney Ray of the Cambridge expedition in 1901 concentrated primarily on Mabuiag Island and the entire language is often in the literature called Mabuiag language. Ray made it clear that Mabuiag was a dialect name (Ray 1907:7). As a name for the entire language, 'Mabuiag' is not acceptable to members of other dialect groups.

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